APPEARED
ON PAGE C1

WASHINGTON POST
17 May 1987

POET, FLORIST, ANGLER, SPY

By Aaron Latham

MASTER SPY James Jesus Angleton's favorite poet was Thomas Stearns Eliot. He knew him personally and corresponded with him. "Eliot was simply monumental," Angleton once told me. "But Eliot killed poetry."

A lot of people feel the same way about Angleton. Before his involuntary retirement in 1974, he was a monumental force within the Central Intelligence Agency. But many believe he came close to killing the CIA—or at least gravely wounding it.

And now Angleton himself is dead of lung cancer. He fought that disease the way he once fought another carcinoma—international communism. But the last of a breed inevitably lost his last battle.

Angleton died last week shortly before a scheduled meeting with Sen. David Boren, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a member of the Iran-contra investigating committee. Boren wanted to ask the old master about American intelligence lapses from Moscow to Tehran. Angleton would have had a lot to say.

So Angleton, 69, died just as the United States government, which had rejected him, was about to take an interest in him and his ideas once again.

I first made contact with Angleton a dozen years ago, shortly after he was forced out of the agency. I got his number out of the Arlington phone book—he was listed—and called him. When I identified myself as a reporter, he asked me to hold on a moment, and I heard a lot of clunking and clanking that I assumed was his attaching his tape recorder to his phone. I didn't have to clunk and clank because my recorder was already hooked up.

Then the spy and I had a long, rambling discussion about poets ("I go to the writers I like. I don't find any new ones I like. I think that Eliot killed it.") . . . and orchids ("The lady slipper is my favorite because it's the hardest to grow.") . . . and the CIA's deeds and misdeeds ("The way the president designs the hat is the way people wear it.") . . . .

The conversation went on so long that my ear began to ache, and I was late for dinner with my girlfriend (who is now my wife). So I started trying to get off the phone, but he wouldn't let me go.

Finally, after exactly 90 minutes when my tape ran out, Angleton said, "Well, I guess that's about it." And he hung up. I'm sure his tape had just run out, too. He had been too fastidious to stop talking sooner and leave a few minutes of empty tape at the end of the reel.

Shortly after I published my interview with Angleton, I received a large manila envelope in the mail. Opening it, I found an 8-by-10 photograph of e. e. cummings. The accompanying letter, which bore Angleton's minuscule micro-dot signature, explained that he himself had taken the picture of the poet. It went on to describe and give the history of every object in the photo—all the knickknacks on the mantlepiece, the painting on the wall, on and on. The last line of the letter invited me to lunch.

Angelton and I met face to face for the first time at La Nicoise restaurant, his favorite, where the waiters wear roller skates. He ordered a kir. He was incredibly thin and chain-smoked Virginia Slims.

He talked about one of his agents who used to write lyrics for Marlene Dietrich in Vienna. He talked about why he hadn't pursued a literary career after the war. "Because I found out the war wasn't over."

He talked about how vulnerable America was to penetration by Soviet spies. "The United States is going through a period now which is analogous to a period the British went through 20 or so years ago when their young men wouldn't fight for the empire. It was during this period in British history that the Soviets recruited Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean and Kim Philby to spy for them."

In the years since that lunch, I have seen how right he was, as we have caught our own lower-level versions of Burgess-Maclean-Philby one after the other.

He talked about T. S. Eliot, whose poetry he took to be the real thing, and Ezra Pound, whose works he considered to be the poetic equivalent of a spy's "cover stories."

"Eliot is my favorite without any doubt, but Pound probably had the finest ear as far as the English language is concerned. But he never stayed with one style and developed it. He was an innovator, but his philosophy didn't really hang together. The fact that he called one book 'Personae' or 'Masks' is reflective of his poetry and the different facades he had.

"I don't think anyone ever took Pound's politics seriously. It was another mask. I think it was a part of that kaleidoscopic side of Pound. I don't think he was an integrated man.

"Eliot was a whole man. Good sense of humor. Fairly dry but very good."

But much of the time he didn't talk about anything at all. I would ask a sensitive question and wait for an answer. I usually have no trouble enduring silence and can outwait anyone. But I couldn't outwait Angleton. He would simply pass the time by using one fork to toy with another fork—linking the prongs the way some people knit their fingers.

When lunch was over, Angleton folded his napkin carefully into a triangle, as if it were the American flag.

I was so fascinated by James Jesus Angleton that I decided to write a book about him, a novel. I reasoned that the CIA was itself in the fiction business since it was always making up cover stories to cloak its

true intentions—and one way to fight fiction was with fiction. I called it "Orchids for Mother" in deference to one of Angleton's several obsessions.

The hero/anti-hero of the book, whose code-name was Mother, thought Eliot had been fatal to verse.

Angleton claimed he never read the book.

Angleton believed Eliot "killed poetry" by rendering it so complicated that it tied itself in incomprehensible knots. The author of "The Waste Land" turned poetry into an art form that was so difficult that only he was smart enough to practice it.

As I researched my book on Angleton, I came to the conclusion that he had had a similar effect upon the spy business. He transformed spying into such an involuted, convoluted, labyrinthine maze that the CIA often got lost in its own intricacies . . . .

. . . Just like modern poetry.

Angleton's complications derived from his inability to trust anyone or anything. As a spy, he saw the visible world as nothing but cover stories and disinformation.

For example, when China's relations with the Soviet Union seemed to cool, Angleton fervently believed that the two countries were playing a trick so America would lower its guard.

As head of the powerful counterintelligence staff—a position he held for 20 years—Angleton regarded *everybody* as a potential Soviet spy. He saw all his brother intelligence officers at the CIA as possible "moles." When the CIA recruited spies in communist countries, he denounced them as counterspies who were actually passing us nothing but disinformation. When defectors came over from the other side, he accused them of coming to tell us lies.

Viewed through Angleton's disbelieving eyes, the world became as confusing as "The Waste Land." In this poem, Eliot wrote of the "Unreal City," but Angleton found the whole world unreal. Eliot wrote, "One must be so careful these days," but perhaps Angleton was *too* careful. Eliot wrote, "*Bin gar keine Russin*"—"I am not at all a Russian"—but Angleton would have demanded proof. And then he still might not have believed him.

Angleton was so worried that a Soviet mole might find out what the CIA was doing that he often kept the CIA from doing very much at all . . .

. . . Just as Eliot was so worried about writing cliches that he virtually stopped writing in any known language.

But Thomas Stearns Eliot was a great poet—and James Jesus Angleton was in many ways a great spy.

Perhaps he was too suspicious, but as we have seen, his successors have often not been suspicious enough. His faithless vigilance might well have prevented United States marines—*semper fidelis*—from giving KGB agents guided tours of the American Embassy in Moscow. He probably would have gotten on everyone's nerves until someone checked the typewriters in that embassy—which were bugged. He certainly would have been ungenerous enough to suspect that the Soviets might try to wire the new American embassy now nearing completion in Moscow—a building that turns out to be one huge KGB microphone. Since American officials got tired of listening to Angleton, the Soviets were able to listen to American officials.

The eternally paranoid Angleton might also have been able to spare his country the embarrassment of having a Soviet defector—whom we had embraced—slap us in the face and redefect to the other side. Sometimes paranoia is just what the doctor ordered.

Of course, one can easily imagine the fuss Angleton would have raised over putting any faith in the Ayatollah Khomeini or Iranian rug-and-arms merchants in a missiles-for-hostages deal. He would no more have trusted the ayatollah than he would trust, say, William Colby, his archenemy in the CIA, who finally fired him.

James Jesus Angleton was the son of James Hugh Angleton, who once rode with Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing and chased Pancho Villa back into Mexico. Angleton *fils* chased spies across Europe during World War II as a member of the Office of Strategic Services—the legendary OSS—the forerunner of the CIA. Gen. William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the head of the OSS, called him the service's "most professional counter-intelligence officer." Of course, Donovan may well have called Angleton some other things, too, since he must have been a constant—if invaluable—nag.

In 1947, Angleton joined and helped organize the new Central Intelligence Agency.

Soon he began building an agency—what might be called the Angleton Agency—within *the* agency. His empire was officially called the counterintelligence staff, but it always did more than its name implied.

One of the counterintelligence staff's extra duties was running the Israeli desk. Angleton won this "account"—one of the most valuable in the CIA—by befriending various Jewish leaders shortly after the war. He was especially close to such leaders in Italy, where his assignment was to rescue the young Italian democracy from the communists, and where Zionists were busy loading Jewish settlers onto ships bound for Palestine. He was trying to save a country, they to found one. And they worked together.

Later, after the founding of Israel, this cooperation became more and more important, in part because Israel was able to recruit agents in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union while America was not. So in effect Angleton had lots of spies while the rest of the CIA had very few.

"I probably had more successes than anybody at that time," Angleton told me. "It was one of the most successful single endeavors in the business."

In the old days, perhaps because he was so powerful, Angleton got along well with the larger-than-life men who ran the invisible agency. He was close to Allen Dulles, arguably the greatest director of central intelligence of them all. And Walter Bedell Smith, an earlier DCI, made Angleton one of his heirs—bequeathing him his beloved fly-tying equipment.

So Angleton was linked to the great names of America's spying past—Donovan, Smith, Dulles.

He was linked to the glories of the past in another way, also. And to other great names.

"I knew Carlos Williams, Eliot, MacLeish, Wallace Stevens, Frost," Angleton told me. "The whole group."

He first made contact with many of these poets while he was editing a literary magazine—the *Furioso*—at Yale. He persuaded some of these legends to contribute poetry to his periodical and paid them with neckties.

"When I was at Yale, I was very near Wallace Stevens and used to visit him," he recalled. "No one would have ever known that he was a vice president of Hartford Life and Fire except that if you tried to smoke a cigarette in his house, he wouldn't let you. I had to walk outside and smoke and then come back in."

Angleton was always a heavy smoker.

"No one would have ever known to look at the man," he added, "that he wrote the poems."

And no one would have ever known to look at Angleton that he had done what he had done. No one would have known that his agents smuggled a historic speech out of the Soviet Union—Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress. No one would have known that he helped capture such enemy spies as Rudolf Abel (who operated in the United States for a decade) . . . George Blake (a senior officer in the British Secret Service) . . . George Paques (a NATO official whose activities found their way into the book and movie "Topaz") . . . among other unfortunates.

No one would have ever known because James Angleton didn't look like James Bond. He looked like T. S. Eliot. The same three-piece suits. The same grave air. The same English manner and mannerisms from years spent in England—some of them war years—during which he met Eliot.

Angleton was always as elegant and eccentric and deadly as an Eliot line.

Aaron Latham's latest book is "Perfect Pieces," a collection of magazine articles. He is currently working on a novel called "Texas Blood."